

Women in their own words in pre-Roman Italy

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Before Rome was the dominant power, an entire range of languages was used across Italy. Some of these languages are very familiar to us, such as Greek, which was spoken mainly along the coasts. But other languages are discussed far less often, even though they were just as prestigious and widely used in their communities. Here Katherine McDonald delves into the vibrant literary culture of one of these peoples, the speakers of Oscan, to reveal what their writings can tell us about the diverse world of ancient Italy.

Who spoke Oscan and why is it interesting?

The Oscan language was spoken and written widely across central and southern Italy, including Pompeii prior to 80 B.C. As part of the Italic branch of the Indo-European language family, it was related to Latin about as closely as English is related to German or Dutch. Yet, just as most of us would struggle to understand more than a word or two of German on first hearing it, so a Latin-speaker would probably struggle to understand Oscan.

There are hints in the extant evidence that Oscan-speaking communities enjoyed a lively theatrical and literary tradition. Cicero tells us that, in his day, Oscan plays – better known as ‘Atellan farce’ – were still performed (even if, by then, they were probably just mimes with Oscan character names). We also know that many Oscan sites had Greek-style stone theatres well before the city of Rome. But on top of this, we have fragments of religious and civic legal texts in Oscan, which tell us about the ways these independent Italian cities organized themselves. And a number of inscriptions in Oscan survive to this day, written in a distinctive right-to-left alphabet.

What is particularly interesting about these inscriptions is that they show glimpses of daily life. Some are even written by and about Oscan-speaking women, for whom we have so little evidence otherwise. Even if such inscriptions often leave us asking more questions than they answer, every piece of information can help us understand more about women’s lives in ancient Italy, particularly when those pieces of evidence are written by the

women themselves. Let us take a closer look at an example.

Two friends, four footprints, two languages?

**hn. sattiieis. detfri
segnatted. plavtad**

*herennis. amica
signauit. qando. a-
ponebamus. tegila(m)*

*Detfri of Herens Sattis signed with
a footprint.*

*Amica of Herens signed when we
were laying out the tile.*

This inscription is in fact two inscriptions, in two different hands, written into the wet clay of a newly-made roof tile to accompany two pairs of shoe prints. The tile itself was found at the large sanctuary site of Pietrabbondante, deep in the mountains of Samnium, an Oscan-speaking area in central Italy. And it is possible that it was made during the re-roofing of a portico next to a large temple in the sanctuary, known to archaeologists as Temple B. So what can we deduce from the inscriptions on this tile?

Who were ‘Amica’ and ‘Detfri’?

To begin with, the doodled messages are written in two different languages. One is in Latin, and is written by someone who signs herself ‘Amica’ – a common name, simply meaning ‘friend’. Free-born women at this time would have used the feminine version of their father’s name (Julia for a daughter in the Julius family etc.), so a name like ‘Amica’, made from

𐌗 a	𐌆 h	𐌑 r
𐌘 b	𐌇 i	𐌚 s
𐌙 g	𐌕 k	𐌛 t
𐌒 d	𐌋 l	𐌚 u
𐌜 e	𐌛 m	𐌘 f
𐌝 v	𐌎 n	𐌛 i
𐌞 z	𐌏 p	𐌛 ú

a Latin noun, indicates that this writer is a slave or, possibly, a freed slave still using the same name. The inscription specifies that she is ‘of Herens’ – Herens is an Oscan man’s name, and probably indicates her owner. It is just about possible that Herens could be her father’s name, but in that case we would expect an *f.* for *filia*, ‘daughter’, after his name. Working outside shaping tiles is also more likely to have been a slave’s or an ex-slave’s job than the work of a free-born woman. All the signs therefore point to Amica being a female slave.

The other message on the tile is in Oscan. It seems to be very similar to the Latin inscription, since **segnatted** is the perfect of the verb ‘sign’, which corresponds exactly to the Latin verb *signauit* (the double **-tt-** marks the perfect in Oscan, just as *-u-* or *-v-* can mark the perfect in Latin). So, who was the second person who signed this tile? The only word that could be a name in the nominative in this text is **detfri**. This word is something of a mystery. If it is a job or title, we cannot make sense of it – we can often work out Oscan words by comparing them to Latin words, but no one has been able to think of a comparable Latin word. If it is a name, it is not one that we know from anywhere else, but the genitive ‘of Herens Sattis’ suggests that this too is a name, and the usual assumption is that Detfri was another slave owned by the same man. If this is correct, then the two inscriptions parallel each other very closely, with the structure ‘X of Herens (Sattis) signed.’

Detfri is a strange name and we may ask

where it came from. It may have been an Oscan name, or a name from whatever part of the world the woman came from originally (after all, most of the slaves in Italy in the first century B.C. were trafficked from elsewhere). We cannot confirm whether Detfri was male or female, but it is commonly assumed that, since Amica was a woman, her workmate and friend probably was as well.

A bilingual text?

The most likely situation, then, is that we have two slaves, Detfri and Amica. Detfri has written in Oscan; Amica has written in Latin. This situation almost certainly means that one of the slaves was bilingual: that is, not necessarily fluent, but certainly able to use two or more languages regularly in daily life. The footprints and texts were written in the wet clay on the same day, before the tile dried out. To write such a similar message in two different languages, Detfri and Amica must have been able to speak to each other. Pietrabbondante is in a mainly Oscan-speaking region of central Italy, so it may be that Amica had knowledge of both languages, while Detfri was monolingual in Oscan.

There are further clues that Amica could write in both Latin and Oscan. Her owner's name is Herens, an Oscan name, which Amica declines with an Oscan genitive ending (-is), even though the rest of her text is in Latin. Had she Latinized his name, the nominative would be Heren(n)us and the genitive Heren(n)i. One explanation for her use of the Oscan form is that she may have been deferring to his native language as a sign of respect, writing his name as he would have written it himself; another is that she may have been used to thinking of his name as Oscan Herens, rather than the Latin Heren(n)us, or she might have spontaneously used endings from the two languages she knew. Yet no matter how we read this, it still looks as though Amica could speak both Latin and Oscan. Of course, if either of the slaves had been trafficked from outside Italy, they might have spoken other languages as well, but we cannot know that from this inscription.

A sign of friendship

This is a fascinating and surprising story. The most basic surprise is that two slave women (or possibly ex-slaves) whose job involved shaping and laying out clay roof tiles to dry were able to read and write. This creates many more questions than it answers. Who taught them to write? Did they use writing regularly, perhaps for simple record-keeping or for marking the tiles? Was the ability to read and write common for slaves at the sanctuary?

Probably less than 20% of the population of ancient Italy, and less than 10% of women, were literate enough even to write a short text like this. While this is only a rough estimate based on the mean literacy rates in other societies before widespread primary education, still we have no reason to think that Roman society would be dramatically different. Surviving texts written by low-status women in their own hand are therefore incredibly rare. We have very few texts written even by wealthy women in their own handwriting: they were more likely than slaves to be literate, but were also rich enough to employ or own scribes to do their writing for them. To have two women writing messages to each other in one language would be unusual enough, but the use of two languages and two scripts makes this inscription unique.

What was going on the day this inscription was written? We can only imagine the details: two slaves, working in conditions that were no doubt very difficult, perhaps took a little time to mess about as friends and enjoy each other's company. But where did they come from? What led them to this point? Did they get in trouble? Was the tile already useless enough that their vandalism did not matter? We have, perhaps, ten minutes of one day of these women's lives documented – and that's it. That is about all we have for so many ancient people, but somehow the casual, fun, almost temporary character of this inscription makes that fact stand out even more prominently.

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